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Confusion in the Classroom: Religion Teachers and Educational Objectives

THE REVEREND ROBERT R. NEWTON, S.J.

There is a growing tension between two different approaches to the learning process. One school of thought stresses the personal character of all knowledge and the need for teachers to act as facilitators rather than directors of learning, as receptive rather than intrusive.¹ The student, driven by his innate curiosity, should be aided in his struggle for expression and fulfillment. Another group argues the importance of scientifically determined and tested learning sequences which lead to the production of well-defined skills.² The teacher should assume the role of manager or technician who tries to bring the student through a series of activities and steps to a specified level of competence.

Currently, the teacher is being subjected to the rhetoric of these two trends on both theoretical and practical levels. Teachers and curriculum-planners are urged to define precise behavioral objectives and are surrounded by people who insist on careful evaluation and accountability.³ On the other hand, they are bombarded with a highly publicized series of articles and books which claim that schools are coercive and repressive, more like prisons than places where young people can learn and grow.⁴ They are urged to eliminate the rigidity, conformity, and impersonality which have characterized schools thus far.

The ordinary teacher is caught in the crossfire. From his own experience as a student and teacher he knows that learning ought to be free and personal. At the same time, he realizes that there are certain minimal skills and content which the student should master. In most disciplines, attempts to relieve this tension come through a relatively exclusive stress on either objective content or personal response. Teachers and course-planners either talk about *what* the students should learn or disregard the *what* in favor of helping the stu-

dent to achieve some highly personal realization. The option for one or the other does not relieve the uneasiness that is produced by the desire of teachers both to be sure that their students are proficient in basic content and skills and to give the students the opportunity to respond to the material in a creative and personal fashion.

The tension manifests itself clearly when teachers try to evaluate student work. They want to know *what* their students have learned, but at the same time they may feel that strict, traditional evaluation contradicts the priority which they would place on individuality and personalized response.

Perhaps no one feels this tension more than the religion teacher. For the religion teacher not only has something to communicate, but at the same time is teaching in an area which, probably more than any other, involves a personal response and adjustment on the part of the individual student. Religion teachers often respond to this tension by stressing at various times either content or relevance. If the religion teacher emphasizes content and tries to parallel the approach and create an atmosphere similar to that of the other academic departments, he is open to the accusation that his course does not meet the real needs of his students. On the other hand, if he adapts his course to the felt religious needs of the students, he hears complaints that though he may be providing a group counseling experience, his approach fails to communicate any solid information or content. The students are not learning anything about their religion.

Once again, the tension manifests itself when it comes to evaluation. If the religion department has emphasized content, then it may evaluate in the same manner as the English or Social Studies department: Did the student know the information? Did he understand the ideas? Was he able to offer reasonable opinions and defend these positions logically? On the other hand, if in the course content has been deemphasized, the religion teacher or department may well argue that

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¹See notes at the end of the article.

the evaluation that is possible in other departments has no place in the religion class. The intended response is too personal, the outcomes of the religion class experience are too subjective to measure. Ordinary evaluative procedures are inappropriate; marks are out of order.

An approach to easing the tension between communicating content and stimulating highly individualized response is suggested by a distinction between two types of educational objectives recently introduced by Elliot W. Eisner.⁵ Eisner sees the school as performing a dual function:

1. enabling students to acquire the intellectual codes and skills which will make it possible for them to understand and profit from the culture passed on to them by previous generations (e.g., socially defined skills like reading, writing, arithmetic), and
2. given these skills, enabling students to enlarge or enliven the culture by providing opportunities for the individual to evolve his own interpretation of the material he encounters.

Corresponding to these two concerns—helping students become skilled in the use of cultural tools handed down by previous generations, and encouraging them to expand these tools so that culture is enriched—are two types of educational objectives which can and should be distinguished in curriculum planning and evaluation. Eisner designates the first as *instructional objectives*, the second as *expressive objectives*.

Instructional objectives are objectives that specify the particular behavior (skill, item of knowledge, etc.) which the student is expected to acquire as the result of his learning activities. The teacher with clear instructional objectives has a ready-made indicator of the terminal behavior desired.

Expressive objectives, on the other hand, do not attempt to spell out the behavior expected of the student after the learning activity. "An expressive objective describes an educational encounter: It identifies a situation in which students are to work, a problem with which they are to cope, a task in which they are to engage; but it does not specify what from that encounter, situation, problem, or task they are to learn. An expressive objective provides both the teacher and the student with an invitation to explore, defer, or focus on issues that are of particular interest to the inquirer. An expressive objective is evocative rather than prescriptive."⁶ Outcomes are not specifically described because the goal is not homogeneity of response, but diversity, a situation where meanings are as unique and as diversified as the students themselves. The evaluation task here is not application of a common standard to what is produced (as it usually is with instructional objectives), but is reflection on what has been produced in order to reveal its uniqueness and significance.

Eisner's distinction is helpful inasmuch as we tend to

reduce all objectives to either the instructional or the expressive. Confusion arises when we attempt to state *all* objectives as though they were either all expressive or all instructional, or similarly attempt to apply the method of evaluation appropriate either to instructional or expressive to all objectives. The teacher who is committed to a curriculum theory which places emphasis on the highly subjective nature of learning may disregard (to his students' detriment) the necessity of making sure that all students acquire the basic knowledge and skills (instructional objectives) which will enable them to offer the responses which are uniquely theirs (expressive objectives). For example, to expect the student to produce a highly individual glimpse into the world of his family (expressive objective) through the use of some medium (sound recording, written word, motion picture, etc.) would require specific technical knowledge and skill in the use of the medium selected (instructional objective).

On the other hand, the teacher who disregards or deliberately excludes expressive objectives and works only to produce specific knowledge and skills in his students errs in the opposite direction. In effect, he says to the student that the discipline he teaches offers no opportunity for creativity or originality, nor for the excitement of personal discovery.

The distinction between instructional and expressive objectives can be of special importance to religion teachers in sorting out their own aims and developing their own evaluative procedures. The religion teacher should be able to clarify his expectations to his students, explaining that while the study of religion involves certain *instructional* objectives, based on a specified content which will be communicated and evaluated, using well-defined measures — on the other hand, it has also certain *expressive* objectives which demand treatment and evaluation on a quite different basis. For example, a discussion of the theology of sin might aim both at presenting a historical overview and contemporary theories on the nature of sin and also at providing the student with the opportunity to explore his own experience and develop his own understanding of sin. The teaching and evaluative techniques a teacher would employ to achieve these two objectives might be quite different.

The survey of the history and contemporary theories of sin might be taught by the lecture method, or by reading followed by discussion. The aim would be accurate knowledge and understanding. The student would be evaluated on the basis of what he knew—who held what, how this theory would compare with another's on a specific issue, etc. The expressive objectives might call for a quite different set of activities. The student could be challenged to explore within the context of his life his own experience of sin—perhaps in a group setting but in a more subjective and involving manner than he employed in the discussion of theory. This objective and activity would be "evaluated" in a way

that would respect the validity of the personal interpretation and adjustment, which would require only serious and honest thought and expression.

The distinction might also help a faculty to place in proper focus the function of the religion department in the religious formation effort of the whole school. Religion teachers often complain that the work of the religion department will have little effect if the school environment is not supportive. Teachers in other departments counter by arguing that they cannot be expected to teach religion when they are already fully occupied in their own academic areas. This recurring controversy is an indication of the blurring of instructional and expressive religious objectives in the total life of the school.

At the heart of this dispute is the fact that the religious formation program of the school should extend beyond the activity of the religion department, and, more precisely, that the whole school is responsible for certain religious formation expressive objectives that overlap only partially the function of the religion department.

For example, an overall expressive goal for the total school religious formation program might be the creation of an environment where religious questions are seriously considered and in which the student has the freedom to review and reestablish (or not) his commitment to Christian values. To produce this atmosphere requires an effort that is not within the capacity of the religion department (though they might be expected to have some special concern here). It requires rather a consensus among the total faculty (which has some tangible indicators) that religious questions are important. It requires further the maintenance of an environment where religious values (e.g., personal care and concern for the individual) are evident. It might also necessitate other activities, such as a systematic program to insure or make available religious counseling, opportunities for prolonged reflection, a liturgical program adapted to student needs, etc. All of these activities are aimed at achieving expressive rather than instructional objectives, and all may be outside the religion department's responsibility.

The dispute concerning whether or not religion courses should be optional provides an interesting illustration of the confusion between instructional and expressive objectives in this area. Frequently, those who urge optional courses argue that religion is such a personal matter that requiring courses in religion is an internally contradictory position. Yet every school has requirements which assure that the student will have some introduction to and experience with the different academic areas. What those who argue against required religion courses should be saying is that these courses should not be pursuing expressive religious objectives. In my opinion, a school that considers itself connected in a special way with a religious tradition should view as part of its responsibility a scholarly and appropriate

presentation of that tradition. Those who attend schools which are associated with a religious tradition should expect that they will learn more about that tradition. On the other hand, they should also expect that in no way will they be forced into courses or activities which will oblige or intimidate them into making (or feigning) some personal religious commitment.

What we need is not only a clearer vision for the individual religion teacher or religion department, but a schoolwide religious formation and education program in which all religious objectives are stated — both instructional and expressive — and the various agents or agencies within the school responsible for these specific objectives are designated. It seems legitimate to suggest that instructional objectives will fall almost totally under the religion department, and that this department, both in its classroom and extraclassroom activities, will have a special interest in the description and pursuit of expressive objectives. However, it will be important also to identify those larger objectives of which the religion department's objectives are only a part, and clearly to designate not only the responsible agents but also the systematic way in which these objectives are pursued and evaluated.

Faculty members, administrators, parents, and alumni might also have much more sympathy with the religious formation programs of the school and the direction of the religion department if they were given a clear delineation of the objectives and activities based on the distinction proposed, and were shown how the program fits together and why different approaches are judged appropriate at various times. Most of all, the distinction between instructional and expressive objectives might help religion teachers and their faculty colleagues to understand what they are doing and provide them with clues to appropriate and inappropriate techniques for mounting religious education and formation programs and for evaluating them.

Footnotes

¹For example, see Carl R. Rogers, *Freedom to Learn* (New York: Merrill, 1969), or Abraham H. Maslow, "Some Implications of the Humanistic Psychologies," *Harvard Educational Review*, 38 (4), Fall, 1968.

²For example, see B. F. Skinner, *The Technology of Teaching* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968).

³For example, see W. James Popham, Elliot W. Eisner, Howard J. Sullivan, and Louise L. Tyler, *Instructional Objectives* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), or the other four volumes in the AERA Monograph Series on Curriculum Evaluation. In a rather brief period accountability has become the war cry of everyone from the federal government to the ordinary citizen.

⁴See any of the many highly publicized critiques of the public schools which are current, e.g., the writings of Holt, Kozol, Friedenberg, Goodman, Silberman, Postman and Weingartner, etc.

⁵"Instructional and Expressive Educational Objectives: Their Formulation and Use in Curriculum," in Popham, Eisner, Sullivan and Tyler, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-31. The section of this paper describing this distinction is intended to be no more than a paraphrase of Eisner.

⁶Eisner, *art. cit.*, pp. 15-16.